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Conference on India, July 10, 1981

INDO-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN THE 1980s

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It is not my intention to attempt to analyze at any length the major issues in Indo-American relations in the early 1980s in this brief essay as this is the proper function of the Department. If anyone should be interested in my views on some of these issues, a copy of a paper that I wrote recently for a Hoover Institution (Stanford University) publication on U.S. Policy in Asia is enclosed. What I shall comment on are some of the more peripheral aspects of the interactions between the American Embassy in New Delhi and the Indian government and public, and the environment in which these occur, as these seem to me to be of some importance in the execution of the Embassy's functions and responsibilities.

One of the safest predictions that a specialist on South Asian international relations has been able to make over much of the past three decades has been that there are troubled times ahead in the relationship between the United States and India, so I might as well start out with that assertion. And, once again, it is not so much the issues directly in dispute between the two states that are the primary problem, but rather the quite different perspectives in Washington and New Delhi on a series of developments in areas adjacent to India over which there are apparent conflicts of interests and policies. I use the term

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"apparent" because it is my impression that in some instances the differences are more rhetorical than real and thus, presumably, susceptible to resolution if both governments were inclined to make an effort. But they do not appear to be so inclined, at this time at least, and the proclivity for public statements by both governments that are insensitive of the tender state of their relationship is readily evident.

There are, of course, some subjects of disagreement that do involve direct Indian-U.S. relations. The most publicized, though not necessarily the most important, is the dispute over the Tarapur nuclear plant and the evident intention of the U.S. government to violate the 1963 agreement under which nuclear fuel has been supplied to India. While both governments appear to be intent on arranging an amicable settlement of this dispute under which the 1963 agreement will be abrogated a decade ahead of schedule, there will no doubt be a loud public outcry in India from a variety of sources--including some oppositionist groups who may want to embarrass the Gandhi government, as well as the usual collection of pro-Soviet media and political sources. But probably more critical to New Delhi are the continuing negotiations between the two governments on economic issues, in particular over Indian exports to the U.S. and Washington's policy toward India's access to financial assistance from international agencies and the multinationals. Some positive trends on these issues are evident, but not as yet on satisfactory terms to either power.

While these economic issues are important and defy easy settlement, most of the public attention in India is likely to be on the

disagreements between Washington and New Delhi on their respective policies toward neighboring areas in and beyond South Asia. Secretary of State Haig's recent statement on military and military-related technological assistance to the People's Republic of China, coinciding with the reported \$3 billion (mostly military) U.S. aid package to Pakistan, will no doubt revive in a more substantive form the often exaggerated but deep-seated Indian fears of a "U.S.-Pakistan-China axis" that is perceived to be directed more at India than at the Soviet Union. It will be surprising if anyone in India even bothers to note the actual quantity of military and technological transfers that eventually take place between the U.S. and China and Pakistan--in part because the U.S. government is likely to try and blur the public's knowledge on these matters for reasons of its own. In any case, there will be a spurt of articles by the Indian foreign policy and defense intellectual communities alleging that once again the American government is out to thwart India's legitimate aspirations to paramount status in South Asia and to encourage neighboring states to take "anti-Indian" positions. I'm not sure that there is anything the American Embassy in New Delhi can do to counter this unwelcome publicity since the Reagan administration seems intent on projecting an image that may be appreciated in some quarters but which will be viewed with disbelief in Pakistan and with disfavor in India.

There are also a number of old issues still around on which India and the United States take different positions--e.g., the Indian Ocean, North-South economic relations, the "Law of the Sea," etc.--and no movement toward a broader convergence of views on these matters would

seem likely at this time. Not all aspects of Indo-U.S. relations are inauspicious, however, as there are a number of subjects on which some agreements may be possible, primarily in their economic relationship. Moreover, neither government seems interested at this time in reviving the verbal-confrontation relationship of the early 1970s; and while this may become more tempting to Mrs. Gandhi for domestic political reasons if the internal opposition to her reign should appear threatening, it certainly is unnecessary now.

There are, however, several aspects of the current Indian political "system" and process that can have an affect on foreign policy decision-making and which deserve some attention. The change in government in January 1980 in India was supposed to represent the reemergence of strong leadership at the Center and a government with a coherent policy stance in the place of the indecisiveness and confusion that had marked the Janata/Lok Dal phase in New Delhi. This has certainly not been the case as yet, and indeed the 1977-1979 period looks rather good in comparison with respect to policy making and implementation in both the domestic and foreign policy fields. One experienced American official has described the existing situation in New Delhi as dominated by an aura of "passivity" in which firm and decisive actions are carefully avoided. This is a striking change from Indian behavior in the past for, in a period of recurrent crises in Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia that seriously impinge upon Indian interests, New Delhi appears reluctant to either assert a leading role in the efforts to resolve these conflicts or to seek advantages for itself in the context of the disputes. One could

even argue that the threats to vital Indian interests--geostrategic and economic--are probably greater today than at any time since 1947 and thus require a better directed and more coherent policy response than has been forthcoming, but none is evident as yet.

The reasons for the lack of assertiveness on foreign policy issues are varied, but two seem critical. The first is the "systemic problem" or, more precisely, the wanton destruction since 1969 of the institutional bases for decision-making within the Indian governmental and political systems. Mrs. Gandhi bears much (but not all) of the blame for this institutional genocide. But she is also one of its main victims in the sense that her capacity to provide strong leadership in programmatic and policy terms has been seriously undermined by the non-functioning of the institutions needed to both make and implement decisions. On foreign policy, for instance, she is no longer surrounded as she was in the 1967 to 1975 period with a small but talented coterie of cabinet colleagues, Ministry of External Affairs officials, a private secretariat, and some non-official advisers--all with a clear sense of what needed to be done and how to do it. They may have been wrong at times, but at least there was little confusion on policy goals and strategies. Apparently there is nothing remotely like that today and foreign policy decision-making is a haphazard affair involving a diverse collection of itinerant participants but no real core group in place to provide the guidance and leadership that is badly needed. The old group of advisers that "managed" the Indian intervention in Pakistan in such skillful ways in 1971 must be appalled with the amateurish ways things are done today.

Another important factor in the lack of assertiveness on foreign policy issues in New Delhi may well be a broad degree of uncertainty in government circles over the definition of Indian interests and the formulation of policy responses to recent developments in surrounding areas. While the old cliches keep pouring out (so much so, indeed, that I sometimes think I'm in Washington), there appears to be much less confidence now than at any time in the past that these are really relevant or serve India's interests. I was impressed last fall with the number of conversations I had in which responsible officials and intellectuals started out with the standard line of analysis on a particular subject and then, without any questioning on my part, expressed doubts as to whether these views had not been surpassed by events. I cannot be sure how deeply this goes or how much it has penetrated into the prime minister's office, but it may help explain India's reluctance to assume a front-line position on a number of issues in which this would have been automatic in the past.

In my view, however, it would be wrong to assume that the ambivalence and passivity that is apparent in Indian foreign policy necessarily will preclude New Delhi from making decisions in the future that could seriously complicate matters for the U.S., as well as for other powers, in the South/Southwest Asia region. The present "system" is both highly idiosyncratic and dependent upon the temporary moods and whims of the one and only leader around, and thus very difficult to predict. It is

probable that there will be more "out of the blue" decisions, such as the one in mid-1980 to recognize the Heng Samrin government of Kampuchea that made little sense in terms of Indian policy objectives, as expressed both before and after this decision, in Southeast Asia or in the Non-alignment Movement. It is not implausible that similar decisions much more important to the United States and neighboring states in Asia could be made again; one might even conclude that this is intrinsic to the current decision-making "system," at least under the right set of circumstances. In any case, it is incumbent on the American Ambassador in New Delhi to be tolerant of his political officers since they are rational beings (presumably) operating in an often non-rational environment.

Are there effective ways for a diplomatic mission to handle such a situation? Probably not in broader policy terms, but perhaps it is possible to have some impact on the decision-making process in other ways. Throughout much of the 1970s, the American Embassy in New Delhi adopted a low profile, deliberately avoiding through personal contacts anything that could be interpreted as intended to influence the government to which it was accredited. This may have made sense at the time, but in my view it was badly overdone. As an outsider but an interested observer, I had been socialized into the embassy system in the late 1950s and early 1960s when a group of (then) young and talented political officers were in regular contact with all parts of the Indian government and political systems and there was no more knowledgeable source of information and analysis of Indian politics available. The situation was very different in the 1970s, not so much because the officers were

any less dedicated but apparently for embassy policy reasons. While this may have reduced the number of wild allegations made by interested (and at times foreign-financed) circles against American officials, I doubt that this served the interests of the United States government. It certainly made my research tasks much more difficult.

But more important, it has been a common complaint among Indians of various political persuasions in recent years that they have lost virtually all contact with the American Embassy. I've heard this repeatedly not only from government officials and political party leaders and workers, but also from members of the press and intellectual community. Rather curiously, this was expressed most often during the Carter administration when, for a time at least, the boys-at-the-top in both governments were talking enthusiastically about the need to expand U.S.-Indian relations at all levels. During visits to India in 1978, 1979, and 1980, I talked with very few Indians in New Delhi's political, governmental, and intellectual circles who had even met Ambassador Goheen or who had anything like regular contacts with other members of the embassy. Perhaps the embassy thought it was avoiding embarrassing some of these friendly Indians in this way, but the usual interpretation from their side was that India was so unimportant to the United States that its officials in India made no efforts to interact with the local populace.

Whatever the reasons may have been for the development of this situation, I would suggest that the time has come for a return to the "good old days" when the Embassy staff was relatively uninhibited in

its interactions with Indians. At least we should make it their decision as to whether they want such contacts. It is my impression that the press and the academic/intellectual community in India today is probably more receptive to unconventional (e.g., U.S.) views on foreign policy issues and less self-certain about their own views than at any time in the past. Also, since we have no idea who may be in a position to influence Mrs. Gandhi on foreign policy issues given the highly personalized but also decentralized decision-making system, it might well prove useful to have as broad a group of Indians as possible exposed to American views on developments from responsible sources rather than fourth or fifth-hand from the Indian or (worse) American press or from people such as myself. It is possible after all that a Dinesh Singh may have as much influence on some critical policy decision as a T.N. Kaul, and the former at least has an open mind on some subjects. "Get out and mingle" should be the operative principle for the Embassy.

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